

Transcription: Benjamin Mendoza

Today is Thursday, May 20th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree and I'm interviewing Mr. Benjamin Mendoza. This interview is being done in person at the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas, and it's being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today.

Benjamin Mendoza: You're welcome, sir.

It's an honor and I guess the best place to start with any of these interviews is tell us a little bit about your boyhood and your life before you went in the military.

Benjamin Mendoza: All right. I used to be a migrant with my family, and I went to school at least four or five months a year until we stopped migrating to other places of Texas. Then I started going to school full time and I got to go to a junior high. When I got to junior high, I was taking as many classes as I could to catch up, so one morning we came to school and we saw three buses standing by, parked along the school, and that's when the recruiters came in.

Now go back a little bit. Where were you born?

Benjamin Mendoza: I was born in Hebbronville, Texas, it's Jim Hogg County.

Oh, Jim Hogg, so down in south Texas. When did you come to Austin? Was that before or after the war?

Benjamin Mendoza: I originally am from Hebbronville, but I moved to Laredo so I could continue my education. So I found a part time job to live there in Laredo and go to school at the same time. And there is where, that's after I returned from the Army and I re-enlisted.

OK, so you mentioned you were in junior high and the recruiters came to your school one day. Where was that, in Laredo?

Benjamin Mendoza: In Hebbronville. I was in Hebbronville and the recruiters came by and they knew we were under age but they mentioned that we had to consult with our parents in order to go in. I was 17 years old at that time.

Was this during the war? Had the war already started?

Benjamin Mendoza: They were running short of people at that time and they wanted to get as many as they could.

Do you remember where you were when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been bombed?

Benjamin Mendoza: I was in school. I was still in school.

What were your thoughts or feelings when that happened?

Benjamin Mendoza: My thought or feeling was always to go into the Army and reach a goal which I read a lot, and as a matter of fact, I went into the Texas State Guard for young kids. We used to handle wooden guns and that's where it all started, got me going.

When the recruiters came, and you mentioned that you were under 18 -

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes sir.

Did you parents have any reservations about signing to let you go in early?

Benjamin Mendoza: No, for the simple reason that I had two brothers already in the service, and they said well, if you got to go and you want to go, we'll be glad to sign.

So you signed up. How long was it then before you were on your way to boot camp?

Benjamin Mendoza: The next day they told us, those that had the parent consent, to be in school and don't bring any books or anything, and the buses came by, brought us to Fort Sam Houston, and they gave us a physical and a mental test, and we were told who could go and who couldn't go.

Did you have any of your friends enlist to go with you?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes, there was at least 16 that I can remember.

So that's a lot then, a lot of young boys from your town signed up.

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes. It wasn't long before that that we were back in two weeks and we got clothing and stayed there a week in Fort Sam, then they put us in a troop train to get 17 weeks of training at Camp Roberts, California.

In California. So they sent you out there. What was that training like?

Benjamin Mendoza: It was a basic training. It was 5 weeks of basic training and 3 weeks of combat training, and they made it so you could take it since we were so young, you know.

Were most of the recruits in your platoon, were they from all over the United States or certain areas?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes. There was a whole battalion of Texas kids taking training at that time, and then the rest of the division were from different parts.

What were your thoughts at that time? Were you eager to get into the fight?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes, it went through my mind that after all this training that I would be doing the real thing in a very short time, and it was that way.

So you were there in training. Did you know at that point that you were going to be in the Infantry?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes, we knew that we would be an Infantry unit at that time.

What are some of your best memories of boot camp, things that stand out the most vividly to you?

Benjamin Mendoza: OK, one thing that happened after we came back from our homes after the training, they took us to this port of embarkation in Fort Ord, California, and we had bag and baggage lined up in the coast, in the beach, and we would see the ships we were gonna be on. And there was, we were all lined up almost ready to go, when a jeep that passed by with two speakers and I don't know, but I heard my name being called, and the buddies next to me said that's your name, you better check. So I got out in front and they came around and says where is your bag? I said there it is. They says get it on this jeep and get on it. Let's go. I still didn't know where I was going. We went back to Fort Ord, the port of embarkation, everybody was gone. There was nobody in there. He said this is gonna be your room when you get back. Here's an envelope with a \$300 check and a round trip to your home town via Greyhound from the Red Cross. Your dad is seriously ill. The Red Cross and the doctors have got together and sent us a telegram. So I got everything in my room and he took me to the bus station and away I went, and after a week or so, I came back to Fort Ord and I could see young kids, you know, coming in in civilian clothes. I stayed there until they went through the training again. And then I was shipped back. So most of my buddies that were with me, their boat sank. The Japanese sank their boat.

Really, wow. So you kind of -

Benjamin Mendoza: So I had kind of got out of that. I was lucky enough. My dad was fine so I was glad to go back.

You kind of feel like the hand of fate there -

Benjamin Mendoza: It was a load off my back. So after then I left on the President Grant. It was a big boat. There was 1,800 troops in it, and we landed, and we weren't told where we were going, but we made a landing in New Guinea.

Well, tell us about New Guinea because I think people that read about World War II in the Pacific, that's a place that stands out.

Benjamin Mendoza: That's where I didn't dream that I would be a long time there, but we were going on a trail up the mountains, and I met my brother.

You met your brother?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes sir.

Tell us about that.

Benjamin Mendoza: He was coming down the mountain ready to go home, and I was going up the mountain.

Did you have a chance to talk at all?

Benjamin Mendoza: No, the sergeant, I started walking backward because he was coming down. He was real sick with malaria, and the sergeant says you stop and I'll kick your butt.

Wow.

Benjamin Mendoza: So we fought there. We got to New Guinea and for one continuous combat for 180 days.

Tell us about the conditions, the weather conditions.

Benjamin Mendoza: The conditions was humid just like it is today. It was drizzling every day, and when we really got into the rough spots in the mountains, we had to fight 3 enemies – the Japanese, the wild animals, and the natives. The natives didn't like us because we were eating their fruit. But it was a rough training for us. Part of that rough fighting, you know. A full company at that time was 199 men, and by the time we got out of there into the Pacific, there was about 13 of us left, and we were hungry, thirsty, and short of ammo, and we didn't have our same clothes for over 200 days.

When you're in a situation like that, what, if anything do you think about?

Benjamin Mendoza: I didn't think about being killed. I was young. But I thought that probably if I die, it would be some kind of illness because we were missing a lot of, you had yellow jaundice, yellow fever, malaria, and a lot of kind of illness that you could catch in the jungle and there was no such medications, there was no, just the medics to take care of you. But we were shelling close to where the waves were coming in. There were big, big stones, and we saw a big fish out in the distance and we saw the codes signaling, you know, we had an extra book there that the chaplain would carry, and extra sailor. He said that he could read the sailing, the code, you know, the Morse code, and he said that there would be a boat that would carry a general, a colonel, and a major, and wanted to talk to us. So they came to us and they said we are gonna have an invasion in Guam, and we'd like for you to see if we can get any leaders out to the experience you had, and the chaplain came up and he says, I don't think you can get any leaders from this group.

Why would he say that?

Benjamin Mendoza: Because he fought with us. He was with us. He was there all the time. And the major answered, he says, to my looks, you are only a captain. He said but I'm the chaplain. If you don't believe me, he ordered, sit down on those rocks over there. He helped us remove our boots and while he was doing that, he started to take socks off of the bottom. You could see raw meat coming, and the stink after more than 200 days. That major threw up right there. So they took us instead to this hospital ship and we stayed there about, we got a clean shower, some clothing. They put us in there legs up and with iodine – burned like heck.

Oh I bet, yeah.

Benjamin Mendoza: And we stayed there until it sort of healed a bit, and back to your unit. We got some new recruits.

When you were going through all that, did you ever have any doubt that you were gonna survive or that the battle was gonna be won, that sort of thing?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes. My thoughts were always positive because we went there, we fought that battle, and then we fought in the Philippines. We took over Manila, went all the way to Bagill, but first we went to Leyte.

Leyte Gulf? Tell us about that place.

Benjamin Mendoza: There's where the jitters got me because you know, after this battle campaign in New Guinea, we had so many men missing and so many men sick that we heard rumors that we were gonna be against the Japanese Royal Marines, and they had been in the Philippines eating the best food, the best clothing, and beside the training was different. They knew karate and they knew bayonet fighting. I mean I got the jitters. I said here we are weakly guys, hungry and thirsty and we're sort of weak, fight against these guys, I don't think we'd have a chance but we'd try. And I don't know. I think God heard us. Do you ever know that Mexico sent a squadron of pilots to the war? That's all he sent. OK, that squadron was in Leyte first and they flew P-38s with napalm bombs, and we, the battalion commander ordered the commander there to, everything was done by map on certain such a date, we're gonna start this offensive and we want this area bombed with napalm bombs. Well, they were concentrated and the grass was about this high. You couldn't see anything. And when we got ready, we'd form a line of defense and we waited, the squadron came in and they started bombing all that area, and we threw smoke bombs so that we could tell them where to go, and when the fire started, they started coming out burning. They left their positions and we were just picking them off. And we got almost half of those people out of combat. But from then, we continued and we liberated a prisoner camp that was there with Americans and British soldiers.

Tell me a little bit about that. That's got to have been emotional.

Benjamin Mendoza: We went, if I'm not mistaken it was Clark Field later, anyway we got organized, we put a hand grenade on the chains of the gates, and each one was assigned a tower to shoot at, and the rest was going in. And we did that in timing and there was pup tents and believe me, we saw just pile of bones and skin. Dry rice, no water, and at that time, being a straight-leg Infantry, no jeeps, no vehicles, no way to bring them in, and you were stuck there, no way to go back home. And the best thing we did, we got, we had some mattresses on our back, put 'em in there and just carried them so one of the marchers that brought us in would take them to this hospital ship.

What was the emotional reaction of those guys when you were liberating them?

Benjamin Mendoza: Oh, some -

Could they believe that you were there?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yeah, some got enough energy to get up and fall back down. I met a guy named Carmen. He was from my home town, and he was about 6 feet tall. He was sick and he was hungry. His face features I could recognize. So I asked him and he says he could hardly remember. And after that they gave him a permanent job when he got well, when he got home. But the reaction of those people, they wanted to be happy and they were happy, but unhealthy.

Oh, they were so starved and tortured and everything. So at that point, when you liberated them, did you think at that point there was no doubt that we were gonna defeat the Japanese and win the war?

Benjamin Mendoza: I had that thought cross my mind. I never will forget. I would say that the Japanese had a good resistance in their own country and I don't think I would have ever made it if it wouldn't have been for the bomb.

Sure.

Benjamin Mendoza: Because otherwise, I don't think the men we had not only in my battalion but the whole division, you couldn't bring any tanks. They were all going to Germany. And luckily we found some, we captured us a little town in the Philippines named Munoz, and the Japanese had all their tanks dug in. All you could see was the canyon. And we were held up, pinned down at the entrance of that little town, and here comes a Japanese truck but it had the American flag. It was an American hospital that was gonna set up, and we tried to get them off the road because we were lined up and down, but they didn't hear us until a rocket hit the radiator, you know, stopped, and the guys jumped out of the truck and there was a guy in the little town in Hebbbronville, his dad owned a drug store and I saw him there and I said what the heck are you doing here? Yeah. But I said get over here. There's a ditch. You're gonna get hit there. By that time, a shell landed right there where he got out. It would've killed him, pick him up with a bloater.

What was your impression of the Japanese that you faced in combat? Did you ever have much interaction with them in terms of...?

Benjamin Mendoza: I was mad at 'em, but I saw pictures when I was machine gunner. The gunner got killed and we didn't have any air cooled machine gun. We had water cooled machine guns. And Buck had went over with the hose and that first squad that handled that got shot up and I was next in line, so I took over and had two new kids carrying ammunition and how I started carrying ammunition, and then they were carrying ammunition, and a water can. And those first 28 Japanese I know for a fact gunned down with a machine gun, we searched them and we said if they got plenty of money we could go to Japan and maybe spend it over there, crazy thoughts. And we saw pictures of their families, they were all family men and they were soldiers, career soldiers, and what I thought always that it was an Army that I feared.

Sure. They were considered a fearsome fighting force.

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes sir, they were well prepared, and like I say, they were strong and that was the only thought that came to my mind every time we, because we had quite a few contacts with -

Did you ever have any that you captured?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes sir.

Tell me what they were like, because you always hear the Japanese wouldn't surrender, you couldn't capture 'em, so tell me about the ones you did capture.

Benjamin Mendoza: What we did was used to tie ‘em, tie their hands in the back because they would commit suicide. They would say that if they die they would be alive again, reincarnated, you know, but we would catch ‘em and bring ‘em back to headquarters, but not too many. When the situation got too tight, they would explode a grenade and that was it.

Did the ones that you captured, when they were captured, did they try to fight you or yell at you, or were they just quiet, or how did most of them behave?

Benjamin Mendoza: They wouldn’t say a word. We had a book, translation, but they wouldn’t say a word, not even their name. I took a canteen of water and gave it to this guy, in his mouth because he was tied up, but he spit it back at me. That was the kind of guys they were. And I’m not racist, but if I see, I still, I see these people around here, it reminds me a lot, you know, because my young years, I passed fighting against them and I look back and I see I was in a combat zone for almost three years, no way to get home, and that was a long time, and during that time I got sick, I got malaria, and when you get malaria, you start changing and sweating and then weak. And there was 40 of us and we went to a place, a landing strip, and a C-47 came in and -

This was in the Philippines?

Benjamin Mendoza: Ours.

Yeah, but where were you when you got malaria?

Benjamin Mendoza: In Bagill.

And that's where the plane came to get you?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes sir, it was, the malaria was in a dormant stage according to the doctor. We probably caught it in New Guinea, and then it didn't come back until we got to a hotter, dryer condition place.

Do you still deal with that today? Do you still have any issues?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes, because we, they sent us and gave us a parachute on that plane, and they took us to Australia and there would be ambulances waiting for us there, but just before we even got close to that, two Japanese zeroes start strafing the plane and we kept going sideways. Well, one more could fire, and the sergeant in charge of the pressure plane there gadget, you had to let the pressure out of the plane. He says OK you guys, I'm gonna open the doors, gonna pull down the hitches and being hit, and you're gonna feel the air, and we need to jump, we need to jump. And when it came to me, he says aren't you gonna jump? I said I'm too weak, if you can help me to the door I'll jump. So he pulled me up and we went together, the sergeant and me, and some way or another I got the energy and hit the water and it was already close to the coast. And he came over to me, you know, he took his parachute off and he says are you all right, are you all right? I said yeah, why you ask? He says because I felt guilty he says when I pushed you down, that same, the motor fell off the plane and it tilted and the tail missed you about that much.

Wow, so you were able to parachute out of that plane.

Benjamin Mendoza: And we were there a few days and they gave us atabrine...

Now you said you were close to the Australian coast?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yeah, we got to the coast. They picked us up.

Yeah, OK, wow. You're very lucky then.

Benjamin Mendoza: Yeah, we all got picked up except two guys that got hit, the ones close to the door got hit. They went down with the plane. But they got us back in one of those boats, what do you call those, destroyer, they got a destroyer and put us back.

How old were you?

Benjamin Mendoza: 18.

18 at that time?

Benjamin Mendoza: 18, 19.

Still very young.

Benjamin Mendoza: I remember my first birthday, 18th birthday, I was digging my first foxhole. I was young and I didn't know anything about what was going on, you know, there would be a chance to get back home or not. I was really getting, I was getting depressed I guess.

Did you get any letters from home at that time?

Benjamin Mendoza: It took three months to get it.

So your parents then didn't know where you were or how you were doing –

Benjamin Mendoza: They didn't know. When I got my ears busted, we took over the Philippine Lake in Manila three times, and we had to come back to the same position, and every time I got there, I kept digging my trench, and I got in and they started shelling on us, and the concussion of one of the shells messed up, I got hit on my, on the back end of my hole and almost covered it up.

That affected your ears?

Benjamin Mendoza: Because I passed out, you know, but the medics, as soon as they started shelling, they started looking and they pulled me out, and I could remember they got the nose pump, you know, trying to get dirt and everything out of my ears and my nose, and I got out of there and by that time, my mom had already gotten notice from the Red Cross that I had been hurt. That was the only thing. And I don't know, the major came over. We were about 400 yards from the front line. There was a fence, Major ____, I remember the name, I got it someplace, he says take this form and give it to the medics, and I gave it, I remember giving it and I still got the slip.

What form was it?

Benjamin Mendoza: He said it was the Purple Heart form and he said that he had written my mom another letter and he wanted me to get the Bronze Star. So two weeks later I saw him in the front. He says that did you ever fill out those papers? And I said no sir. He says why? I told him sir, with all due respect, I came here to help win a war. I didn't come here trying to be a hero. And he embraced me at that time. I got the 60 signed by him. And from then on, they bombed, the Japanese on the other side of the lake, and we took over it.

And then where were you when you learned that the atomic bombs had been dropped?

Benjamin Mendoza: I think we were in the mountains of Bagu, if I'm not mistaken, because we didn't have any helicopters, but we had one of those observation planes that had come in, a little Pampas like this, and everybody grabbed one when the war had ended.

Did you believe it at that time?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yeah, because it was one of our planes and the paper was coming from headquarters.

What was the response of yourself and all the ---

Benjamin Mendoza: Everybody started throwing their weapons up in the air, and I told my group at that time, I was a buck sergeant, I had a group of people in my squad, I said don't throw away your weapons. Everybody started down the cliff throwing machine guns and everything. We got over there, got through the back, they wanted the number of machine guns. Well, they're

out there. The Japanese couldn't read English. You have to go get 'em. Have the guys then come back after the war. And then after that, the people from headquarters started coming in and they said well, you need to have so many points to get back home. I missed it by three or four points. So they sent a detachment of the people that didn't qualify until two or three more weeks, and they sent us to Korea, and we picked up the weapons from the Japanese. They turned them in. We put those people on boxcars, families and all, and that train would take them to the port of embarkation in Korea, Quinsan.

Quinsan, yeah.

Benjamin Mendoza: And we stayed there until all the weapons were turned in. They came back to the Philippines.

When were you able to finally get back home?

Benjamin Mendoza: I was in Yokohama.

In Japan?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes. I went there because they were using one port of embarkation, not in Manila, and went to a Fort Place and then re-enlisted for three years, but it was the army of occupation. I enlisted there for three years and I got paid, hadn't been paid for three years. I sent my money home by telegram. When I came back to Fort Place, no, to what was that artillery camp in Oklahoma?

Fort Sill?

Benjamin Mendoza: Fort Sill, I reported there, and they sent me in for I think 9 months to Japan.

What was it like coming back home to the United States after having been gone for the length of time you were gone and having dealt with what you dealt with? What was that like to be back? Was it kind of surreal?

Benjamin Mendoza: There was rumors that they were laying off all these people that was working. There were being no jobs, you know.

There was a fear the Depression was gonna restart?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes, so two or three guys I was with, what are we gonna do? Let's go down to re-enlist until this thing gets over or gets back in shape. We started thinking before, you know, and that's what we did.

Was it strange though to be back and see cars and movies and women and just all those things you hadn't seen for three years?

Benjamin Mendoza: It was a whole, we saw cars, you know, kept staring, you know. And everything, airplanes, even tanks. We had some of those things over there.

So you ended up re-enlisting. You made a career out of being in the Army, right?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes.

When was it you finally got out? You said '84?

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes, I got up, I got out in, I used my GI Bill, and it was hard for me to get back in college because the GEDs had burned up. It was a barrack where they kept the records, and after I got, they found my name on a list that I had finished my high school work, I started going to college.

Where did you go to college?

Benjamin Mendoza: In Laredo Junior College. After I ____ my GI Bill, this thing on Russia and Cuba, remember that crisis?

The Bay of Pigs?

Benjamin Mendoza: During all this time, I stayed in Reserve, and I put in for two years and I went back into the Army. Then I got out, got my same gal back, and I went back to the GI Bill after 90 days in Korea, you know, you get the GI Bill.

So when you finally retired from the Army, what was your rank?

Benjamin Mendoza: OK, my goal when I was young, I said one day, I want to be a first sergeant. I got my paper, orders there.

That's pretty awesome. When did you pick up first sergeant?

Benjamin Mendoza: I picked it up before I went back on active duty in the Army Reserve.

Do you remember what year that was?

Benjamin Mendoza: I have it right here.

OK let's see it, that's great. Oh wow, you've got some great paperwork. There you go. 1955. First sergeant. That's great.

Benjamin Mendoza: And this is what I'm waiting for right now.

Oh, from the TEA. So you still, yeah, get your high school diploma.

Benjamin Mendoza: That was the one that got lost.

That's neat. So you're hoping to get a response on that.

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes sir.

So you still, it would just be a nice thing to have.

Benjamin Mendoza: Yes, at least to show to my grandchildren.

Sure.

Benjamin Mendoza: Because after I had a hard time getting back in college, I got 81 hour grade in education.

And what high school was it? Was it in Hebbbronville?

Benjamin Mendoza: No, I went to Hebbbronville to junior high, and then they established high school courses in Laredo Junior College.

Well I would think that they would grant that and they would have you at the next graduation ceremony if you wanted to attend. I think that would be a real honor for them.

Benjamin Mendoza: That'd be something to remember.

I bet your grandchildren would want to see that, too.

Benjamin Mendoza: I came here and applied for substitute teacher. I got it. Bilingual.

So how long have you been in Austin now?

Benjamin Mendoza: All right sir, I've been in Austin I think about 16 years. It was recent. I was working at the International ____ with a contract with customs and immigration and I saw my daughter and my son with other kids crossing the bridge, jump across the bridge walking, and I followed them. I took my shirt off, stay on t-shirt, and they got into this bar and they were actually serving drinks. And I didn't tell them anything. I talked to my wife and I had been in Fort Hood and we used to come to 6th Street with the soldiers there. Said one day I'm gonna move to Austin. The guy said yeah, man, yeah. So I told my wife you know what? Let's sell the house and go to Austin because I will be able to see my kids graduate here. I was always looking for a school. I'm close to Lamera High School and I enrolled my kids in school and a few years later, I'm looking through the wall of the house and you could see five diplomas. I would've never seen it. One graduated San Marcos. One is a tech nurse, one I believe from UT. Anyway they all graduated.

That's great.

Benjamin Mendoza: 5 girls and 1 boy.

Oh that's great.

Benjamin Mendoza: So I feel that I have done part of my job.

Oh absolutely, yeah, you've got to feel great about that.

Benjamin Mendoza: And right now my wife, I started teaching my wife how to ___. When I came back, I had to bring my kids and get 'em out of school from Hawaii. My wife got sick. She had cancer and died and I remarried again, and that's why I have these kids and I helped my wife with her schooling and got a job in food service in school, and this year she'll be there 20 years.

Wow, that's great, too. That's something. Well sir, I tell you, it's an honor for me to be able to talk to you and interview you and it was a remarkable story of what you've been through and did for our country. I know that Commissioner Patterson and everybody at the Land Office appreciates your service for our nation.

Benjamin Mendoza: I thank you.

And that's what this program is all about, is to record these stories so people don't forget 'em so they're there for future generations. And we've got in this building archives that go back hundreds and hundreds of years.

Benjamin Mendoza: I know.

Is there anything, you know, thinking of somebody that might be listening to this 100 years from now hopefully, is there anything you'd want to say to them about your time in the service?

Benjamin Mendoza: I believe that first of all when I, if you go, I encourage young men and women to get into the service not only for the great discipline but to get experience on what's going on and how it takes, what it takes to have a free country, to be able to get up and drink your cup of coffee and have your breakfast and go to work or go to school. The best thing to do is try to get as much education as you can. It is something that you will cherish during your lifetime, and then at the same time, teach your children how and why we respect the United States because this is a free country and we want to keep it that way, and the young generation is the one that's gonna be responsible for that because we set up a _____ and it's up to them now to continue with that.

Well sir, I tell you it's been a real honor. I appreciate it very, very much. Thank you.

Benjamin Mendoza: Thank you.

[End of recording]